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The Impact of Socio-cultural Systems on The Animation Industry

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Abstract: Over the past ten years, the animation industry has undergone a significant shift in its storytelling approach. Rather than relying on simple, entertaining tales filled with gags and adorable characters, the medium has increasingly drawn inspiration from real-life social ideologies and cultural backgrounds. As a result, animation has become not only an educational tool, but also a means of re-establishing national identity for postcolonial societies. This paper discusses the shift towards socio-cultural narratives that has been driven by a desire to create more meaningful and impactful stories that resonate with audiences on a deeper level. By exploring complex themes and issues, animators are able to engage viewers in a way that goes beyond mere entertainment. This has also led to a greater emphasis on diversity and representation, with stories that reflect a wider range of experiences and perspectives.

Keywords: Animation, Culture, Society, Storytelling, Cinema

1. Introduction

During the last decade, many countries chose to use entertainment media as a cultural communication tool, where representation of the local or international communities helped promote cultures. Many countries have immensely improved their cultural identity image in the international market which positively affected their economy in various sectors. Asia Pacific being one of the largest CCI (Cultural Creative Industries) Markets in the world, generates US\$ 743B of revenues (33% of global CCI sales) and 12.7 million jobs (43% of CCI jobs worldwide) (Lhermitte, Perrin, S. Blanc, 2015). India alone brings about ~ 1.5B footfalls in filmed entertainment and ~ 50M a day in radio and music. Africa and the Middle East achieves US\$ 58B in revenues (3% of the total) and 2.4 million jobs (8% of total CCI jobs). (J. Amitabh, 2021). According to a study done by OECD for Italy G20 Presidency Culture Working Group, Cultural and creative sectors can generate important spillovers to the wider economy. However, it is only possible when these two sectors are treated as: economic and social investment, culture proofing (creating employment opportunities for creative professionals and firms), mainstreaming culture (integrating culture in wider policy agendas), empirical analysis of cultural and creative sectors and empowerment of governments to integrate culture into broader economic and social development strategies. (OECD, 2021). As culture proves

to be an important factor in a country's economic and social development, this improvement also proves valuable to culture in return. It grows into a mutualistic relationship where both parties feed from one another: economy needs value definition, and culture needs sustainability.

Culture is the set of symbolic productions, knowledge, creations, modes of expression and behaviour that reflect the imagination of a community or a people. If culture is characterized by its dual nature: immaterial (as a producer of values and meaning) and economic (as a creator of wealth and jobs), it becomes, from there, a factor and a driving force development, particularly when public policies establish structures where cultural practices, economic rules and means of communication converge. (CESE, 2018).

Of course, this relationship isn't as simple as we are discussing. The most important factor is that these economic sectors help the cultural survival and unity of a national identity as immunity against Westernization. The film industry (being one of the most important tools for this sustainability) contributes to the shaping and survival of a country's cultural identity, whether the movie's target is local or a global audience. During this last decade, Animation cinema has shown a great interest towards folktales and myths as a source of inspiration and readaptation. Many international animation companies have embraced this new concept for different reasons. For example, Disney company used folktales from around the world to establish its 'child friendly' or 'reconnect with your inner child' label, which witnessed positive national and international feedback. The company had created many memorable Movies inspired from tales around the world - Arab culture: Aladdin (1992), Asia: Mulan (1998), Latin America: Coco (2017) and Encanto (2021) etc. While Disney company had clearly adapted this approach for financial reasons (More exposure outside U.S means more profits), Irish animators on the other hand have embraced and encouraged the readaptation of Celtic folktales in animation as a way to re-establish the Irish identity and fight colonization.

The purpose of these animation film projects wasn't only for entertainment, but for social education as well, which we also find in many of Malaysia's first projects of socio-cultural education and raising awareness through animated folktales. The interconnection between cultures that is now more discernible due to modern age globalization, resolves in a collective act of local and global socio-cultural sustainability.

2. The socio-cultural impact on Disney's starting point

F. Thomas and O. Johnston describe animation as a medium where the possibilities are infinite. They focus not only on timing, but on several other factors that make this medium a unique and powerful form of expression. Animation can be used to tell a story in a way that no other medium can. It can also be used to create a sense of motion and energy that is impossible to achieve in live action. It can also be used to create a sense of humour and whimsy that is unmatched in any other form of storytelling. It is only possible, that with all these factors combined, the emotions an animator wants to convey are properly expressed, "the response of the viewer is an emotional one, because art speaks to the heart. This gives animation an almost magical ability to reach inside any audience and communicate with all peoples everywhere, regardless of language barriers.", describing it as animation's biggest strengths (F. Thomas and O. Johnston, 1981). John Halas and Roger Manvell talk about animation techniques as a tool that express the movement, which is one of the essential characteristics of life itself. The representation of vitality through visual arts is one of the most important achievements of mankind. In the early stages of animation, which is mostly described as cartoon, the focus was on creating gags and earning laughter from the audience, an unavoidable tradition that resulted into a series of cliches, which have gradually confined this art form. (J.Halas, R.Manvell 1959).

Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio was founded in 1923 by Walt and Roy Disney. Within three years of its inception, the studio produced two movies and acquired a studio in Hollywood. Despite these early successes, the studio faced financial difficulties, which were alleviated by the creation of iconic characters such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. These characters not only saved the studio from sinking but also garnered immense popularity across the globe. In the 1930s, the Disney studio achieved a significant milestone with the production of its "silly symphony" short animation series, which earned the studio its first Oscar. And on 1934, Disney produced its first full-length feature film, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves". Following the conclusion of World War II, the company underwent a major turning point. Not only did they produce their first live-action movie, but they also released another film that marked their brand, "Cinderella". In the 1980s, Disney expanded its reach by entering the cable TV market and making strategic media acquisitions. This allowed the company to broaden its audience and increase its revenue streams. However, it wasn't until 2006 that Disney made a significant move towards digital animation by purchasing Pixar. This acquisition marked a shift in Disney's focus towards more technologically advanced forms of animation. By leveraging the expertise of Pixar, Disney was able to produce highly successful films such as Toy Story, Finding Nemo, and The Incredibles. These developments were instrumental in cementing Disney's position as a leading entertainment company. (Andrian Sanders, 2021).

Walt Disney started noticing the impact of folktales on his artwork at an early stage. One of the company's most popular characters worldwide 'Mickey Mouse', was inspired from Aesop's Fables, as well as the uncommon success of the film 'three little pigs'. This popularity guided Disney towards a reshaping of the medium, as he realized that the strength of a cartoon resides in the stories being told. (A. Meyer, 2016). Many of Disney's earlier feature-length movies have helped establish a respectful reputation for the company's work, as well as bridge the cultural gap between animated cartoons and 'high art'. It was reported by Eric Smoodin that early efforts of including culture into the animation industry were made under Disney's direction. The company's library was said to contain an incredible number of children's stories, joke books and files of humorous publications. This huge source of inspiration is what made the 'story department' a valuable pillar of the production process. (figure 1). The story department, of course, consists not only of men of words, but of men who can translate words into picture action—artists who can tell stories as well as storytellers who can draw". (E. Smoodin, 1994). In 1937, Disney company had invested a serious amount of time and efforts into developing new animation techniques for their first feature-length movie "Snow white and the seven dwarfs". This new approach included improvements on the script and narrative. Since previously animated Disney shorts had successfully involved the audiences emotionally, they were encouraged to seek out well-structured stories, including Folktales. However, since it was the first feature-length project to test this method, Disney was worried about two major factors: 1. That a feature length animation movie might not involve the audience emotionally as successfully as their short films. 2. That adults might not be interested in watching a feature-length cartoon. Another challenge that was facing the pre-production team, was the readaptation from folktale to screen:

"Relying on a classic story like snow white was both an advantage and a problem. Told in its most basic form, the plot was too thin (and too brief) to sustain a feature, whereas fleshing it out might add unnecessary clutter and diffuse the impact of this famous tale. "(L.Maltin, 1980).

However, against all scepticism, the movie 'snow white and seven dwarfs' turned out to be an unexpected success, conquering all audiences and critiques alike. G. Bendazzi says that this immense popularity was due to the solid narrative which was dominated by the classical unities of time and structure, supported by an incredible visual representation. This movie – based on a fairy-tale – marked a new beginning for Disney's company, deciding to aim their future projects at children audiences or at what Bendazzi called, 'the child which is inside all of us'. (G. Bendazzi, 2015).



Figure 1. Disney 1934, an early picture of the story department and caricatures.

Snow white and the seven dwarfs, was considered a pioneer in the animation industry, and helped reshape the definition of animation as a medium. The fairy-tale, as a main source of inspiration, reflected Disney's long history with children's entertainment. After the immense success of the movie, they intended to reimagine these tales through their movies, as well as use them both for entertainment and ideology (A. Meyer, 2016). Throughout the years, the company's fairy tales concept quickly extended to the live action movies, with the release of 'Enchanted' in 2007, a romantic comedy movie that is heavily inspired from Disney's previous fairy tale animation films, talks about a princess that escapes the 'fairy tale world' to land in New York where she needs to find true love to lift the curse casted by an evil queen. This transition was also brilliantly expressed in the movie, as the first part of the film (the princess in her fairy tale world) was 2d animated, referring to Disney's animated classics, and the moment she lands in Manhattan through a magic well, the movie transforms into live action. The positive feedback received from the audience was due to the relatability the public felt towards the movie. Even though the targeted viewers were adults, they grew up watching Disney's animations and were thus, well familiar with talking animal helpmates, gags and comic Relief, musical numbers, the romance, the 'happily ever after' etc... (P. Greenhill and S. Matrix, 2019). The fairy-tale influence carried itself all through the late-20th and 21st century popular culture. Cinema and television have frequently used fair-tales as primary materials for their productions such as : (ABC) Once Upon a Time (2011–present), (NBC) Grimm (2011–present), The Huntsman: Winter's War (2016) and its prequel Snow White and the Huntsman (2012), Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters (2013), the Shrek films (2001–2010), Into the Woods (2014), Maleficent (2014) [11], and Frozen (2013). This mass-mediated hype, especially in the United States, contributed to the new perception towards fairy tales (C. Schwabe, 2016).

2. Folktales and myths as important mediums for socio-cultural values

The industry of animation, considered nowadays as an important media outlet, commercializes, and standardizes the production of culture. This important feature involves the audience not only as spectators, but as participants in a complex process of decoding cultural meanings as well as appropriating them (S. Belkhyr, 2012). The promotion of socio-cultural values through storytelling

using animation as a primary medium, was the recent focus in the animated films industry. In research made by N. Azan, N. Nasir and M. Ghazali, they quoted Mahar and his perception of teenagers' identity shaping through their favourite animations, of what they describe as 'Edutainment'. This shaping process also relies heavily on the cultural influence on the individual. (N. Azan, N. Nasir, M. Ghazali, 2010). Jane Batkin describes national culture as a mirror through which we can view animation, "culture is a placeholder for identity and identity is embodied through culture". For us to understand the characters in an animated film, we need to understand the culture that they come from. It is the primary source that guides not only animation, but also live action films, for identities to be properly shaped and perceived within a film. (J. Batkin, 2017).

The Irish animation industry has come a long way since the early 1990s. At the time, there was only one significant studio, Don Bluth's Sullivan Bluth Studios, which was set up in Dublin, with the help of the Irish government. The aim was to create an indigenous animation industry that could compete on the world stage. The studio was a great success, producing several classic animated movies, such as *The Secret of NIMH*, *An American Tail* and *The Land Before Time*. It also helped train a new generation of Irish animators, many of whom have gone on to establish their own successful studios. Tom Walsh, a professor at the University of Victoria, has spoken out in support of the promotion of indigenous history as a legitimate historical discourse. He believes that this is an important part of the decolonization process, as well as the reestablishment of the Irish identity. Even the visual style used to tell the stories in animation, was heavily inspired from Celtic artefacts rather than fine art tradition, to evoke the sense of 'Irishness'. This was a conscious decision by the filmmakers, who wished to create a unique and identifiable visual style for their films. Irish Celtic folktales and myths have become a frequent mode production adapted by Irish animation directors. The rich history and mythology of Ireland provides ample material for adaptation, and the resulting films are a testament to the creativity of Irish animators, "an engagement through which Ireland's literary tradition in the animated form might also demonstrate the dominant role played by literature in the construction of Irish identity". (T. Walsh, 2018). One of the most acclaimed Irish animated films 'The Secret of Kells' (2009), is based on the legend of the Book of Kells. The film tells the story of Brendan, a young monk who helps to protect the book from raiders. The movie's forest spirit named Aisling is based on the Tuatha Dé Danann of Irish mythology. Another acclaimed Irish animated film by Tomm Moore is 'Song of the Sea' (2014), (figure 2). This film tells the story of Saoirse, a young girl who is a selkie, or seal-woman (Selkies are creatures that can transform from seals into humans, and they are often depicted as being able to travel between the human and spirit worlds). Saoirse must return to the sea to save her brother, against her father's will. This movie was inspired by the selkie myth, incorporating many other spirit characters from the Irish folklore. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in traditional culture and folktales in many postcolonial societies. (T. Walsh, 2018).



Figure 2. A scene from the movie 'song of the'. The 2d stylesl, the flat representation of the whole envirement and the thin decorative lines are all inspired by the ancient celtic art.

In Russia, animated television programs were used to promote the USSR through the traditions of folklore. The Russian animation was affected by Disney, not only in the drawing style, but also the simplicity of the narrative discourse. The trademark of the Soviet Union was based on heritage and Russian folklore. This was used in many animation movies, the first of which was inspired by a traditional Russian fairy tale 'Fairy tale about Tsar Durandai' released in 1934 and was followed by several other projects such as 'Little Tower' (1945), 'Fairy tale About a Soldier' (1948), and 'Geese Swan' (1949). After the end of the Soviet Union, the use of folktales as a primary source of inspiration played a key role in defining the Russian animation style, thriving both nationally and internationally. (M. Cuckson, 2021).

In Indonesia, animated folklore is used as a meaningful tool for language learning because of its cultural awareness and life context that is used to stimulate students' personal involvement in real life. Additionally, the use of animated folklore can help students learn vocabulary and grammar in a natural context, making the learning process more effective and enjoyable. (Dharsono, Guntur and B. Setyawan, 2019). Movies such as 'Timun Mas' (2016) and 'Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih' (2000) were some of the first animation projects to represent the Indonesian culture. These movies were able to showcase the unique aspects of Indonesian folklore and customs, which helped to introduce the country's culture to a wider audience. (U.Sarjiati and A. Lissandhi, 2021).

There are many other very popular animation movies that perfectly represented folktales and myths of different cultures, such as 'The Book of Life' (2014) and 'Coco' (2017). Both these films talked about the Mexican Dia de Muertos or Dia de los Muertos (Day of the dead). In the movie Coco, we can see all the customs and traditions done during this day, and especially the meaning behind it. Coco's journey from the land of the humans to the land of the dead is also the depiction of how this myth explains this transition (a parallel universe). In 2016, Disney's 'Moana' was released, representing one of the myths of the Pacific Island cultures. The film makers visited Tahiti and Samoa, to get inspired and create an authentic visual representation: they consulted with linguistic professionals, incorporated elements such as native artifacts and even used less obvious facets of the culture (such as the ocean being a living entity). Overall, the 'Moana' movie turned out to be very close representation to the original myth of the Pacific Island cultures. Some honourable mentions:

- Chinese Mythology: Mulan (Disney 1998) – Guardian Brothers (Chaser Animation Studio2015).
- Judeo-Christian legend: The Prince of Egypt (DreamWorks1998).
- Native American (Inuit): Brother Bear (Disney2003).
- Hindu Mythology: Sanjay’ Super Team (Pixar 2015).
- Japanese Folktales: The Tale of Princess Kaguya (Studio Ghibli 2013).

The nature of these animated stories teaches the children how to persevere through the difficulties and challenges of life and leave a positive impact on the world. Animated tales, based on true cultural beliefs and customs, manifest inside children what Joseph Campbell calls, ‘The hero journey’. These stories teach mythology, as well as the importance of having a positive impact on the world (D. Emerson, 2019). This rediscovery of socio-cultural values is seen as a way to re-establish the national identity in what Franz Fanon calls ‘passionate research’. The representation of traditional folktales in cinema is a key part of this reclamation of culture. (S. Hall, 1989).

3. Conclusion

In the recent years, the animation industry has slowly but surely enlarged its creative scope, reaching towards dramatic feeling, lyrical and socio-cultural values. This has not only expanded the nature of the public involved, but also created a more intimate and direct relationship between the audience and the filmmaker. Movies such as L’Idée, The Tell-tale Heart, The Magic Canvas and A Short Vision, have clearly expressed the integration of serious social themes into animation (J.Halas, R.Manvell 1959). The animation industry has the potential to cover a variety of genres just as diverse as live action cinema. Through its naïve appearance, as well as childish characters, the filmmaker succeeds in infiltrating reality, and promoting social messages. (G. Cierznewski, 2016).. That is why, in recent years, the entertainment industry (which includes animation movies) was thriving for new content that would appeal to the audience. This new direction involved the reshaping of traditional cinema narratives, which Melanie Schiller calls as “Media-conscious Narratology” (M. Schiller, 2018).

However, the animation industry continues to face challenges during the pre-production and post-production phases. These challenges have a profound impact on the final quality of the film. Sébastien Lachaussée and Elisa Martin-winkle have identified three main points that highlight these challenges: 1. The development: In the realm of animation, it is not uncommon for scripts to draw inspiration from pre-existing materials such as novels, graphic books, and comics. However, it is crucial for the director to be supervised by the author during the process of rewriting the script. Unfortunately, author rights are often neglected when it comes to animated pictures. This neglect can lead to a loss of the original intent of the story and can result in a less cohesive final product. 2. Financing: It is well-established that the cost of production can be quite high, owing to the advanced techniques and technologies employed in the process. As a result, it is not uncommon for animated film productions to seek out national and international co-production opportunities. For instance, countries like France offer a range of aid support options to directors, which can be utilized in specific parts of the production process, such as writing aids, advance on receipts, aids after production, mobilization of support fund, and so on. This support can prove to be invaluable in mitigating the financial burden of animation film production. 3. Production: In film production, disputes over salary can arise between a director and the production team. This is especially true when the director's involvement spans the entire production process, potentially creating a precedent for their compensation and rights transfer (60%, 40%). To avoid such conflicts, it is crucial to establish a clear definition of the director's services and integrate all stages of development into the employment agreement. This applies not only to the director but also to technicians, including animators. By doing so, we can ensure a fair and transparent compensation structure for all parties involved in the film production process. (S. Lachaussée and E. Winkel, 2021).

Finally, the animation industry faces challenges in terms of staying up-to-date with the latest technology and techniques. This requires a constant investment in research and development to ensure that the industry remains competitive. Overall, these challenges require a high level of skill, dedication, and resources to overcome in order to deliver the proper quality with the right message.

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My research aim is to develop a visual model for Moroccan animated folktales under three major sectors: animation-folktales- visual identity. I taught as an associated professor/visiting faculty at various universities and schools in Morocco and India for over four years.